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## **The Eliyahu Narratives Yeshivat Har Etzion**

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### **Shiur #84: The Storm Part 3: Eliyahu's Journey to His Place of Ascent**

**By Rav Elchanan Samet**

#### **1. The Route of Eliyahu's Journey**

At the beginning of his commentary on our chapter, Abravanel asks the following question (his third):

For what reason does Eliyahu, prior to being taken up, decide to go to Gilgal and to Beit El and to Yericho? If we propose that he was commanded to do so by God, then we must ask further: what need is there for this command and for his going there?

To this question we may add that the purpose of Eliyahu's journey would appear to be to reach the eastern side of the Jordan, i.e., the plains of Moav. Why, then, is this particular place chosen as the point of his ascent to heaven? To quote further from Abravanel (fifth question), "Why is he not taken while on the way or at one of the places that he visits?"

Before discussing the purpose of Eliyahu's journey, let us first define its route.

The journey begins with Eliyahu and Elisha departing from Gilgal (v. 1). Where is this place called Gilgal?

Gilgal is a name that occurs many times in Tanakh, concerning a few different places in *Eretz Yisrael*:[\[1\]](#)

- a. It is the name given to the place "at the eastern edge of Yericho" where *Benei Yisrael* encamp after crossing over the Jordan (*Yehoshua* 4:19)
- b. In *Devarim* 11:30, the Torah mentions, in describing the location of Mount Gerizim and Mount Eival, a place called Gilgal that is close to Shekhem: "Are these not on the other side of the Jordan... facing Gilgal, by Elonei Moreh?"

- c. In *Yehoshua* 15:7, in the description of the boundaries of the inheritance of Yehuda, we are told: "And the border goes up... to Gilgal which is opposite Ma'aleh Adummim." This refers to a third Gilgal, east of Jerusalem.
- d. In *Yehoshua* 12:23, in the list of the thirty-one kings, mention is made of "the king of Goyim at Gilgal." From the geographical context there, it would appear that this Gilgal is located in the northern part of the country.

The Gilgal in our narrative would appear to occupy a place of relatively high altitude; one descends from there to Beit El, as in v. 2: "They went down to Beit El." Clearly, then, this cannot be the famous Gilgal, the one close to Yericho, since the journey from there to Beit El involves a steep and difficult ascent. Likewise, the geographical route taken by Eliyahu and Elisha would make no sense if we identify the Gilgal here as being close to Yericho, since they return to Yericho afterwards.

Hence we must conclude that the Gilgal mentioned here is not one of the places listed above. Many commentators and scholars seek to identify the place as being somewhere in the region of the Arab village of Jiljilya (close to Ma'aleh Levona, fourteen kilometers north of Ramalla and twelve kilometers north of the biblical Beit El, where the Arab village of Bittin is now located).

If we assume that Gilgal is north of Beit El and fairly close to it, it seems easier to answer Abravanel's question, quoted at the beginning of this shiur. Eliyahu's purpose appears to be to reach the place where he will be taken up, on the eastern side of the Jordan (the reason for the choice of this site remains to be discussed). A person who is in Gilgal, north of Beit El, would indeed follow the route set out in our chapter in order to reach that destination. He would head south towards Beit El, then turn eastward, on the ancient road that goes down to Yericho, and then he would head towards the Jordan River, in order to cross over it.

However, this conclusion fails to answer the question. Eliyahu tells Elisha (v. 2), "For God has sent me up to Beit El," and then again says (v. 4), "For God has sent me to Yericho." The simplest meaning of his words is that his appearance in both of these cities is to be at God's command, as an objective in its own right, rather than just as way-stations on the road to the eastern side of the Jordan. Furthermore, we must ask: what are Eliyahu and Elisha doing in Gilgal, so that this place became the point of departure for their journey?

## **2. The Reason for Eliyahu's Appearance in Gilgal**

The Gilgal where Eliyahu arrives, at the beginning of the story, appears again later on in the stories about Elisha. Following the episode of his revival of the Shunemite woman's son (Chapter 4), we read (v. 38): "And Elisha returned to Gilgal, and there was famine in the land, and the sons of the prophets sat before him..."

From where does Elisha "return," and why is his arrival in Gilgal considered a "return" at all?

In the story of Elisha and the Shunemite woman, we find Elisha (and his attendant) "passing through" Shunem and being based at Mount Carmel. However, it is only in Gilgal that we find him in the company of the sons of the prophets, who sit before him, and further on in chapter 4 (v. 43) it turns out that they now number a hundred followers. Elisha is depicted, in this narrative, as the person who is responsible for their sustenance.

Like Shmuel, Elisha is a prophet who is constantly on the move among the cities and towns of Israel. Just as we read of Shemuel (I *Shemuel* 7:16-17), "He would cover a circuit of Beit El and Gilgal and Mitzpeh... and would then return to Rama, for there was his home, and there he judged Israel, and he built an altar there to God," it seems that the same applies to Elisha: he covers a circuit of Shomron and Shunem and Mount Carmel, and then returns to Gilgal, for there is his home. "His home" means, first and foremost, his family – his wife and children. In addition, however, this is his "professional headquarters" as a prophet: it is here that the sons of the prophets whom he teaches, and for whose sustenance he is responsible, gather. Therefore, after describing Elisha's various activities in Shunem and in Mount Carmel, as part of his "circuit" through the cities of Israel, the text tells us (4:38), "And Elisha **returned** to Gilgal... and the sons of the prophets sat before him..."

Still, we have gotten ahead of ourselves in this discussion. In chapter 2, the sons of the prophets are not yet sitting before Elisha; in fact, it would seem that at this stage there are no "sons of prophets" in Gilgal at all. This is not surprising: Elisha, at this stage, is not yet a prophet; he is simply the attendant of Eliyahu, who is the prophet of the generation. Nevertheless, we may assume that even at this early stage, Elisha has established his home in Gilgal. It is there that his family resides, and when he is not accompanying Eliyahu, his teacher, that is where he is to be found.

If our assumption (based mainly on the narrative in 4:38-44) is correct, we can now understand the meaning of Eliyahu's appearance in Gilgal and Elisha's journey with him from there. Eliyahu comes to Gilgal on the day that he is going to be taken up to heaven in a storm, in order to bid farewell to his disciple and attendant, who is at this time at his home in Gilgal. Elisha readies himself to leave his home and his city

in order to accompany his master, while Eliyahu tries to persuade him to stay there: (v. 2) "Please remain here [in your city, in your home], for God has sent me as far as Beit El." However, Elisha, who understands the meaning and purpose of Eliyahu's appearance in Gilgal, is determined to go on with his master to the place where he will be taken up.

When Elisha later consolidates his position as Eliyahu's prophetic successor, the sons of the prophets flock to his city, and then the number of them sitting before Elisha in Gilgal are double the number of the sons of prophets who were previously in Yericho. (Compare 4:43 to verses 7 and 16 of our chapter.)

Translated by Kaeren Fish

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[1] In fact, the Arabic names of several sites preserve the biblical name "Gilgal," a phenomenon which has led some scholars to propose that the name indicates some recurring phenomenon in the landscape of the country, such as a large mound (*gal*) of rocks; see H. Gevaryahu, *Biblical Encyclopedia* [Heb.], Vol. 2, "Gilgal," p. 487.